

# “Countering Indifference: The Role of the Arts”

## by Maxine Greene

**This is the text of the address presented by Maxine Greene  
to the California Council on Teacher Education Spring Conference luncheon on Friday, April 1, 2005.  
The address that day was delivered by her from New York via a video link to the luncheon  
at the Hyatt Sainte Claire Hotel in San Jose, and transmission was interrupted by technical difficulties.  
Following is the complete text of her address.**

I am honored to be asked to speak and will keep imagining that things were otherwise and that we were face to face. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to make these arrangements, even though I am not a passionate enthusiast for distance teaching or learning, as you will soon hear and see. I am troubled by technicism, as many of you are, in spite of the increases in speed and efficiency brought about by advances in technology. What I am also troubled about, among other things, is the growing tendency of schools to define their objectives in technical or in quantitative terms. It is increasingly disturbing to depend on assessments and accountability, to spend so little time on what it means for individuals to become—to create themselves among beings who are different, to choose themselves as thoughtful human beings, decent and engaged, wide-awake to the world. You are aware of all this as you are of the proposals for improved education for teachers-to-be. You are certainly informed about the challenges of teaching diverse children, of working to connect your teaching to the experiences of young people, often entirely different from your own experiences in growing up.

Also, you share with me an indignation about the neglect of the arts and aesthetic education—and the awareness, the understandings full attention to the arts makes possible. Authentic encounters with the several arts can open windows for teachers and enable them to envision new possibilities for meeting the demands of a moment marked by deep uncertainties and fearful offences against what most of us consider to be decent, humane, and just. I am full of respect for the outspoken critics of federal policy and for the proponents of what we who are educators think of as reasonable reforms. I choose, however, to take a somewhat different slant and reflect on what it means to teach in good faith and with full consciousness of what is going on.

This is a moment, after all, when many voices are being silenced, when many of us are wondering whether it is even worthwhile to take issue with authorities, to protest what we think is wrong inside the classroom and outside. Not long ago, I heard an interview with the playwright and actor, Wallace Shawn. Talking about how horrified he and so many others are by the war in Iraq, by what has happened in Rwanda, the Sudan, the Congo, and other sites of massacres, he kept stressing how our privileges keep us so immune to

sufferings in other places and how we go on leading fulfilling social lives and enjoyable conversations without having to attend to the sound of gun shots, screams, and children's cries. When American soldiers are shown rushing into an Iraqi house in order to gun down those inside or to blow the house up, we are so used to the sight of those earth-colored uniforms and helmets, we do not have to think about the family huddled on the street (if they are lucky). That family, however, cannot but try to picture those assigned to do such damage. And we, 'voyeurs' as we are, protect ourselves by thinking that we had nothing to do with it, that we never would have given such an order or done such damage, and we retreat. Why pay particular attention after all? Shawn said he felt the need to take responsibility, that he felt a 'worm' inside—and had to find some way of becoming an activist.

I cannot but wish that practicing teachers would share such compassion and concern, and that they would ponder ways of suffusing their teaching with visions of action, with efforts to pay heed, to change consciousness or, perhaps, hearts and minds. I am reminded of Albert Camus's *The Plague* and of Tarrou arriving in the plague-stricken town of Oran. Before long he organizes "sanitary squads" among the stunned and outraged citizens, afflicted by a pestilence that made no distinctions and for which there was no cure. The narrator says that those who enrolled had "no such great merit in doing what they did, since they knew it was the only thing to do, and the unthinkable thing would have been not to have brought themselves to do it. These groups enabled our townsfolk to come to grips with the disease and convinced them that, now that the plague was among us, it was up to them to do whatever could be done to fight it."

There is little difference between the disasters that cause Shawn to feel the 'worm' and the disease that moved some people to join Tarrou's squads. It was not a matter of rewards and punishments or of abstract argument, the narrator goes on. "The essential thing was to save the greatest number of people from dying. . . . And to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was only logical." In our case, I think, our case as educators, one of the essential things (in addition to the teaching of critical literacy, of the fundamentals of mathematics and the sciences) is to overcome care-

lessness, thoughtlessness, and indifference to the best of our abilities—and to refuse mere compliance with what is. Again, in *The Plague*, the narrator takes note of the moralists proclaiming there was nothing to be done “and we should bow to the inevitable.” Those willing to do something might disagree with one another, but their conclusions were the same: “that a fight must be put up, in this way or that, and there must be no bowing down.”

There is an essay by Theodore Adorno called “Education after Auschwitz” which has taken on a peculiar relevance for those of us teaching today at a time of growing awareness of our country’s complicity in torture, unwarranted ‘detainment,’ maltreatment of immigrants, and other injustices. Depending on their ages, young people—exposed to media as they are—cannot escape dreadful images of other people’s suffering. Granted, they have different ways of grasping all this; some cannot tell the news from TV drama, especially in these days of ‘reality’ television. But the difficulty of eradicating memories of the Twin Towers (even in the case of the very young) must remind us that our students too have a consciousness of vulnerability new in this country and, perhaps, an erosion of confidence in the long praised superiority of democracy.

The young were long protected against confrontation with our nation’s flaws, either deliberately on the part of the adults surrounding them or because of the obfuscations in our history. Teachers today must somehow reconcile their own unease and even their own more troubling insights with their obligation to initiate their students into a civil society they consider worthy of membership. This brings me back to Adorno’s essay, which begins: “The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again.” He had in mind the holocaust, of course, and the indifference in response to it. We ought easily see the connections between that response and the silences greeting the monstrosities of today.

Part of the indifference may be due to a sense of collective disinterest and a willingness to run with the crowd. But to run that way removes the sense of personal responsibility; one simply conforms. Indifference, too, may be due to the conviction that violence and injustices are simply inevitable from time to time; like earthquakes, they cannot be overcome. All we can do, many believe, is to give in.

For Adorno, however, critical thinking makes giving in far less likely “As long as it doesn’t break off, thinking has a secure hold on possibility. . . . Open thinking points beyond itself.” To say this is, for me, to suggest an intertwining of thinking and imagination. We know that imagination reaches towards a future, towards what might be, what should be, what is not yet. Or, as Dewey once described it: it is the capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise. Or it may be conceived as a “passion for the possible.” Indeed, Emily Dickinson wrote; “Imagination lights the slow fuse of possibility.”

I want to make the point that the arts, among all human creations, have the potential of releasing imagination if the reader or perceiver or listener can lend his/her life to a work.

An example might have to do with coming into a room and seeing a book lying on a table. It may be a play by Shakespeare, a collection of poems by Elizabeth Bishop; left there unread, it would not exist as a work of art. Picked up, recognized as something other than an object, the book might, in its very being, elicit an act of imagination. The reader may find a new dimension of a self-in-the-making, even as he/she moves level by level into the depths of a novel, story, or poem, even as multiple perspectives open within it.

When I argue for an integration of the arts in curriculum, this suggests what I have in mind. I recall John Dewey saying that facts are mean and static things unless imagination goes to work and opens intellectual possibility. It is not hard to summon up history courses focused on dates, wars, presidents, and how what was called learning was a matter of outlining, listing, memorizing.

Suppose, for instance, we are studying migration patterns in this country: movements to the west and then ‘backtrailing’ to the east; movements from south to north, south from the northern border, internal migrations from coast to Midwest. The facts become mere givens—names, dates, lines on maps. Yes, they need to be taken into account as beginnings, take-off points. Consider *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the faces, the human presences it sets before us, people enslaved and free, with the open questions, the contradictions, the ambiguities on the journey to the always receding ‘territory ahead.’

All this is to be experienced, not to illustrate or motivate, but as an event within the reader’s life. The imagination activated to bring the novel alive opens manifold intellectual possibilities: the impacts on adolescent life in the slave south; the persistence of old chivalric myths and disguises; the irresistible power of a new technology; the shapes of piety and evangelism. Surely, teacher education in social studies would be enriched and complicated by the inclusion of the arts. Think, for example, of Jacob Lawrence’s “Migration Series,” those remarkable paintings of African-Americans taking the trains to go north, arriving in an inhospitable Chicago. Think of linking some of the history of jazz—and, yes, I free associate to Edward Hopper and his renderings of empty city streets, lonely people in hotel rooms or in luncheonettes in early mornings.

The patterns forming in experience will be multiple. The connections that are made are what give rise to meanings. Aesthetic education is an effort to make it more likely that people will lend their lives to forms of art, bringing them alive, opening the questions that keep human beings wide awake and in the world.

Prior to her address on April 1, Maxine Greene was presented an award by the California Council on Teacher Education recognizing her “for releasing our imaginations on the arts, education, and social change through her life’s work.”